

Understanding Leadership: Let's Put the Horse before the Cart

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Leaders today lead in much the same way as those that preceded them. This begs the question, Why has our technology of leadership had such little impact? Our current "technology" of leadership presumes the existence of a leader/follower relationship. The problem is the presumption. If the leader/follower relationship does not exist, the application of the "technology" will be ineffective. A framework is established for a model which suggests the direction for a more effective "technology" of leadership. If we can effectively teach people how to get others to follow then we can more effectively concentrate on improving the leader/follower relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Max Wortman(1982), professor of management at the University of Tennessee, once observed that "leaders" today do the same things, in the same manner, as "leaders" in decades past. Dr. Wortman made that statement more than 30 years ago and it is still true today. The question which must be asked is why has the current technology of leadership failed to have a significant impact on the practice of leadership? This paper attempts to provide some possible answers and suggest a direction in which we might find a solution.

A Conceptual Gap

The first clue to the problem can be found in the typical history of leadership thought found in any college textbook on management, organization behavior, or other similar subject.

Most accounts begin with "trait theory." In reality, trait theory was not a "theory" as we know it, a conceptual model developed and articulated by a specific individual. Trait theory was more of a generic term to describe the common beliefs of the entire period prior to the introduction of the styles approaches to leadership. What was important about trait theory, however, is that it was a theory of determination; a theory of how a person became a leader. Behind trait theory was the belief that one was born to lead. In other words, the traits were genetically determined. Let's understand the real issue here. Traits did not make someone a leader. Traits were only the outward manifestation of being born to lead. The traits made leading possible and probable. The driving motivation to identify the "traits" was so that leaders could be identified early so that the process of electing, appointing, promoting, or otherwise elevating a person to leadership could be more effective and avoid the frustration of elevating a person to leadership who could not lead. By identifying the potential leaders early in their lives, they could be given training to make them better at what they were destined to become.

Research on traits continued well into the sixties. However, beginning in the forties the popularity of trait theory began to wane significantly, as research tended to show a very weak link, at best, between traits and leadership.

While there was a mass exodus from the trait theory camp, one cannot completely discount the validity of trait theory. The evidence in natural animal societies and human history clearly indicates that leaders exhibited some traits in common. Take animal societies, for example. The one that becomes the leader is often the one that is able to defeat the current leader in battle and provide protection for the pack or society. So strength and size are traits that we can look to as precursors to being a leader in those societies in addition to some measure of aggressiveness. To some degree, we see the same thing in early human societies. We see this even in biblical accounts. Saul, was chosen as the first king of Israel because, among other things, he stood head and shoulders above the rest of the population (Bible, I Samuel 10: 23, 24). When David was preparing to go up against Goliath, King Saul offered David his body armor (Bible, I Samuel 17:38). This suggests that David was not a little boy but a strapping young man, close to the size of Saul himself. Other accounts of David indicate he had great physical power.

Perhaps the trait most common among leaders is an aggressive personality. Now the question becomes one of whether personality is genetic or a product of external development. The answer is probably both. Those involved in behavioral genetics seem to agree that personality genes exist but that we are likely decades away from isolating such genes (Azar, 2002). They also seem to agree that it would not be a single gene controlling personality but a combination of many genes and that environment plays a role as well (Reiss, 1977). We can put a bunch of toddlers in a room and watch as one or two become the dominant player in the group. How much of that dominance is genetic and how much is conditioning? What we do know is that those with dominant personalities are the ones who seek out leadership roles and become class presidents, group leaders, and such.

We also know that some people, who did not display aggressive personality in most of their lives, occasionally get thrust into a leadership role and do quite well. Corazon Aquino of the Philippines comes to mind. She was the meek wife of a popular activist politician in the Philippines and was thrust into the public spotlight when her husband was assassinated. She took her husband's mantle, overthrew the dictator Marcos and became the President of the Philippines. She went from meek to powerful, almost overnight. She did not possess the typical "traits" of leaders and is a good example of the weakness of trait theory.

With trait theory on the wane, the need was felt to search for a model to replace trait theory. Ohio State University is often recognized as the place where the search began in 1945 and continued at the University of Michigan in 1950. Out of these beginning studies came what is now known as the "styles" theories of leadership; theories that dominate the literature to this day.

The styles theories evolved out of the desire to replace the belief that leaders were born with a theory which shows that leaders can be made. While the styles theories were quite successful in achieving acceptance and dominance in the popular literature of management and leadership, a subtle shift in emphasis occurred. The emphasis shifted from that which makes a person a leader to that which makes a leader effective. Thus, rather than having a new theory of determination, we have, instead, theories of practice. We were putting the cart before the horse.

Herein lies the first major problem. With the elimination of trait theory as a viable theory of leader determination we are left without a model to explain how people become leaders.

Semantic Confusion

Another problem, which has added to the inability of current leadership theories to significantly impact the practice of leadership, is that we have allowed "leadership" to be confused with "management," and we have obscured the definition of leadership. We have focused so narrowly on styles that we forgot other aspects of leadership, and we have ignored the reasons people follow.

If one reads the dominant styles theories, in primary sources or secondary sources, one will get the impression that leadership is synonymous with management, supervisor bossing behavior. A clear example of this is Robert Blake and Jane Mouton's Managerial Grid. This theory is listed among the

styles theories of leadership in most texts yet its title suggests it is a theory of management practice rather than leadership. In their book, The New Managerial Grid(1978), the word "manager" is used consistently throughout the book, and the styles are called "manager styles." In writing for another publication, Mr. Blake and Ms. Mouton switched terms, calling their grid a "leadership grid"(The Military Review, July, 1980).

Other theories and publications are no less confusing on this issue. Fiedler's Contingency Theory and Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory are called leadership theories yet both deal extensively with the act of "managing" human behavior in organizational contexts, i.e. supervising and managing subordinates effectively(Hersey & Blanchard, 1977; in Dunnette, 1965). Hersey and Blanchard's first book espousing their "leadership" theory was titled Managing Organizational Behavior(1977), House and Mitchell's Path-Goal Theory deals exclusively with supervisory or management behavior toward subordinates(in Johns, 1988), and Tannenbaum and Schmidt's Leadership Patterns speak of various decision making patterns used by "managers"(in Johns, 1988).

Definitions of leadership, commonly found in the literature, tend to be limiting as well as confusing. Typically, leadership is defined as "the process of influencing the activities of an individual or a group in efforts toward goal achievement in a given situation" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). The definition further implies that leadership is a function of the act rather than the office. Common usage would define leadership simply as what one does as a leader. Influence, then, becomes an outcome rather than the essence or objective of leadership.

One is not a leader because one influences others but rather one influences others because one is a leader.

It was said earlier that the styles theories are theories of practice rather than of leader determination. Many, however, tend to think that the styles theories are theories of determination. They believe that a person can be made a leader by training that person in the use of leadership styles which are believed to be most effective(Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). This position makes the very faulty assumption that the primary reason people choose to follow another is a person's "style." Why this assumption is in error will become clear when the leader-follower relationship is discussed in more detail later. Suffice it to say at this time, if leader "style" is not the reason people choose to follow another, then trying to "make" leaders by teaching people a good "style" is doomed to failure from the beginning.

Another difficulty with the way the current technology of leadership is used is that many practitioners of leadership development programs tend to make a value judgment about which style is "good" and which style is "not good." Generally, an authoritarian style is considered not good and a more participative style is considered good. In reality, we can all probably recall authoritarian leaders that people loved and participative leaders that were not regarded so well. The bottom line is that the value judgments about authoritarian vs. participative are not beneficial and that best style to use is the one that works best for the individual.

Most of us are likely to be familiar with the DISC Personal Profile System, formerly published by Carlson Learning Company and the Meyers-Briggs Personality Inventory. While both instruments are different, they yield similar results. They tell us the predominant manner in which we tend to relate to others. The important lesson to be gained when these instruments are used in training, according to their literature, is that we should accept what we are. The behavioral style that we use predominantly is our strength, not a weakness. It is a strength, because it has been proven to work for us.

Massey (1979) suggests that our basic behavioral patterns are programmed into us by age 12 and that those patterns are not likely to change unless we experience a Significant Emotional Event (SEE). Corazon Aquino experienced a significant emotional event with the assassination of her husband that changed her from a meek housewife to an aggressive political activist.

Back to Basics

Quite simply, a leader is one who leads. In its simplicity this definition has wide ranging implications regarding what makes a person a leader and the nature of leadership. Implied is that the essential ingredients which make one a leader is the presence of followers and some concept of where he or she is

going and what it takes to get there. Without followers "leader" is just an empty title and without a place to go leading cannot occur. It is further implied that a leader is out front, blazing the trail, setting the pace, setting the standard and determining the direction of movement.

Although the personal pronoun was used above, and will continue to be used as a generic term in the rest of this paper, the definition also implies that a leader is not necessarily an individual. A leader can be a group, a corporation/company, an industry or a country. How many times have we heard the United States referred to as the "leader" of the free world? That General Motors is a "leader" in the automobile industry? or, that United Airlines is a "leader" in the airline industry? These entities are leaders in exactly the same way as individuals--they have followers, they are going where others want to go, and they are out front of the followers blazing trails and setting standards. In short, they lead.

Our definition says nothing about having to be a boss, supervisor, an executive, or a manager in order to be a leader, or, for that matter, having to be a subordinate in order to be a follower. Ralph Nader is a "leader" in the consumer product safety movement but is not the boss, supervisor or manager of all those involved in the movement or the consumers he represents. Gloria Steinham was, and still is, a "leader" in the feminist movement but not, in any sense the boss, supervisor or manager of all those who look to her for leadership. If the key ingredient in being a leader is having followers, then the leader-follower relationship must be understood.

Following is an activity of choice; of free will as opposed to being pushed, pulled or prodded. Chester Barnard said that leadership is bestowed by the followers(in Dunnette, 1965). The follower chooses to follow because he or she wants or needs to go where the leader is going, believes the leader knows the way and what it takes to get there, and believes the leader will get him or her there. In other words, the follower chooses to follow based on a need to be led and the confidence in the leader's ability to satisfy that need. The follower does not necessarily have to like the leader, the leader's style, the leader's methods, or the leader's morals. These factors come into play only as the need to be led diminishes.

An example of this concept can be found by imagining a survival scenario. Visualize, if you can, a scenario where you are among a group of people who survive a plane crash in a very remote area with rugged terrain and subject to sudden temperature and other weather extremes. The leader that emerges will be the one who has the skills to be best able to help everyone survive the elements and get back to civilization. The leader's style, personality and likeability will have little to do with choosing to follow his or her leadership. You have a need to survive and get back to civilization, and that person can get you there. Now, if there were more than one person capable of helping you to survive and get back to civilization, then style and likeability may be factors. However, the bottom line is still the ability to get you where you need to go.

Following decisions occur at two points in time. The first decision occurs when an individual decides whether or not to follow based on the need to be led and the confidence in the proposed leader to do the leading. This is consistent with Barnard's Acceptance Theory of leadership(in Dunnette, 1965) and Herzberg's Two Factor Theory of Motivation(Herzberg, 1966). The decision to follow constitutes an acceptance of the leader, thus, leadership is bestowed by the follower. The decision to follow is based on the internal motivation of the individual and not external factors such as the leader's style.

Positions of authority in an organizational setting are often called positions of leadership; the assumption being that authority gives one leadership over those below. It may be easy to confuse management authority with leadership because the activities and outcomes are similar. However, they are not the same.

Recognizing and accepting a person's authority to command is not the same as accepting that person as a leader because leadership and authority arise out of two different relationships. Authority arises out of the relationship between a person and a position whereas leadership originates out of the relationship between the leader and the led. A person may command because the position gives him or her the right to command. The subordinate obeys because he or she has a contractual obligation to obey and when the command and the obeying are within the "zone of indifference." A leader may command because the followers allow him or her to command as necessary to accomplish leading.

Toward a Broader Understanding of Leader Behavior

Leadership was defined earlier as what one does in one's capacity, or role, as leader. Where most definitions merely define leadership as influencing others, included in this definition are acts of responsibility as well as acts of influence. For example, the President of the United States, as the leader of this country, has certain responsibilities and duties that have nothing to do with influencing. He has a responsibility to provide for the nation's security by protecting the borders and maintaining a standing army for our defense. He has a responsibility to stay informed on world events and read his intelligence briefings on a daily basis. When the President reads his daily briefings in the privacy of his office, he is exercising leadership by doing what a leader in his position is expected to do, although the act itself influences no one.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF LEADERSHIP

With an appropriate concept of leader, leadership and follower, a model of leadership can now be developed which incorporates leader determination as well as leadership practice. In other words, develop a model that puts the horse before the cart.

Considering that the decision to follow and the decision not to follow occur at two different points in time, and for different reasons, leadership can be viewed in terms of a time continuum.

The beginning of the continuum would be the point in time where the individual (group, organization, etc.) is not a leader. There is a period of time bounded by this point and the point in time where the individual is recognized or accepted as a leader, that is, when one or more persons decide to follow. Leader determination, therefore, is achieved in this period. Since the decision to follow is based on the follower's perception of the individual's ability and willingness to lead, it could be concluded that leader determination depends on specific behaviors of which directly and indirectly influence the decision to follow. This behavior cannot be labeled as "leadership" because the individual is not yet a leader.

Getting the Nod

For many people, the role of leader is thrust upon them because of unique combinations of circumstance and the timing of pressures for social and political change. History is replete with the Lech Walesa's, the Corazon Aquino's, the Nelson Mandela's and the Martin Luther King's. Others intentionally seek to lead. They seek to become president of their school class or, chairperson of important committees. Some seek political office at the city, state, or national level. Some seek office in their local union, church, or civic organization. A young person may seek to be a leader in the military by entering ROTC in high school or college, or enlisting in the military and going to Officer Candidate School.

If we examine the behavior of people who became true leaders, we would find a consistent pattern of behavior that helped them achieve recognition as a leader.

Achieving behavior consists of a two-step process. The first step involves building a power base. Knowledge and expertise are a source of power thus, gaining the knowledge, competencies and vision to lead is essential. Corazon Aquino gained her preparation through her association with her husband and his activism. Martin Luther King gained his preparation through formal education and work in the church. Lech Walesa gained his through active membership in his country's labor union.

The second step consists of letting others (potential followers) know that you have such knowledge, competencies and vision and convincing them that you are willing to take them where they want to go. This process would involve aggressive communication. You do this by visibly demonstrating one's competence and ability to lead whenever possible. When others see in you what they want in a leader, they will flock to you. In other words, experts who are openly and visibly expert in what they do, get noticed and others come to them for leadership and guidance. All three leaders mentioned in the preceding paragraph became noticed through their activism.

Political campaigns offer an excellent example of this process. In preparation, candidates move through the education system, gain some real-world experiences in the workplace, and then learn as much

as they can about the issues of concern to their potential constituents, the possible solutions, the political processes involved in securing favorable actions and the levels of grass roots support. Assuming the candidate achieves an adequate level of preparation, he or she then seeks every opportunity to be seen and heard by the voters. Aggressively and visibly the candidate communicates his or her vision, ability and willingness to lead the fight for the voter's concerns at the appropriate levels of government. It is generally agreed that the successor is the one who is the most aggressive and visible.

When one receives a job promotion to a position of authority and responsibility one has achieved leadership but not as we often think of leadership. Mistakenly it is believed that the position means leadership of subordinates but it is not the subordinates who do the promoting. The organization, as represented by superiors, does the promoting and thus the bestowing of leadership. Since leadership is bestowed by followers, the organization and one's superiors are the followers in this situation.

Achieving a promotion is a classic example of "achieving" behavior as viewed in this model. Consider that in order to earn a promotion one must develop an expertise and distinctive competence in an area important to the organization and then make certain that one's superiors notice that competence and willingness to take on additional responsibility. With the promotion the organization is saying that it has needs and goals that it believes the individual being promoted can help it attain as a leader within his or her area of distinctive competence.

Leadership of subordinates does not come automatically with the position. It must be achieved separately. Because of the prevailing belief that leadership comes with the position, many never engage in "achieving" behavior with any intention and never achieve a true bestowal of leadership by subordinates unless by accident. Leadership of subordinates can only occur when one has the ability and the willingness to help subordinates get where they want to go professionally.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The implications of this model for leadership development should be clear. One must achieve leadership before one can engage in leadership behavior. To teach leadership skills to those who have not achieved leadership would be to doom the process to certain failure. If we are to succeed in the development of leaders we must begin at the beginning. Help potential leaders develop "achieving" skills, teach them how to use those skills to get the desired following, **then** help them develop skills that make them more effective as leaders.

This model presents some challenges as well. As a general model of leadership it is not limited to individuals but is applicable to the full range of leader relationships. This means that the process of achieving and maintaining leadership is generally the same regardless of whether it is an individual, group, organization or other entity seeking to become a leader. The challenge for training and development is to think beyond the narrow focus of the individual and design leadership development programs with wider applications.

A workable technology of leadership has been elusive only because we have not understood the gap that kept it beyond our reach. We have been putting the cart before the horse and wondering why it did not go anywhere. With the recognition of this gap and the beginnings of a model to bridge that gap, we can now start putting the horse in its proper place. A workable technology of leadership can be a reality in a few years.

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